

## SPORTING LEGENDS: ERIC BRISTOW

**SPORT: DARTS**

**COMPETITIVE ERA: 1977 - 1997**

Eric Bristow (born Hackney, London, 27th April 1957) was a British darts player whose skill at the game in the 1980s helped turn it into a worldwide spectator sport.



Bristow won his first world championship in 1980, defeating fellow Londoner Bobby George, and so began a decade's worth of domination, in which he would regain his title in 1981 and win it again in 1984, 1985 and 1986.

Like his snooker contemporary Steve Davis, however, he had to cope also with a shock defeat during this period, when young unknown Keith Deller beat him in the 1983 final, not to mention Steve Brennan in the previous year's 1st Round. He finished as runner-up on four other occasions up to 1991.

The nickname of the *Crafty Cockney* was given to Bristow when he visited an English pub of that name in 1976 during a visit to Santa Monica, though this nickname is technically inappropriate due to his place of birth not being within the sound of the Bow bells, which defines Cockney status.

Nevertheless, it became a nomenclature which stuck throughout his career. Bristow wore a shirt (which he received from the same pub) depicting a uniformed British policeman, a Union Jack and the title *Crafty Cockney* whenever he took part in a tournament.

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**Bristow was the best darts player of his generation - and he knew it!**

The way players hold a dart when playing the game has no rules nor recommended technique - players grasp a dart simply in the manner with which they feel comfortable. Bristow became known more than other players, however, for his style, which involved the extension of his little finger in a similar manner to the drinking of tea in upper class circumstances - "me perked up right pinkie" he called it.

Yet when he pulled the dart back from aiming position, he circled it with all of his fingers, therefore leading to speculation that the routine with the little finger was worthless to his throw. When asked about it, Bristow admitted the style was "just for show".

Bristow emerged as the most successful and consistent darts player of the 1980s, reigning as number one in the world rankings from 1st January 1980 until 1987. He was fortunate to have been around at the right time as television began showing increased interest in the sport in the late 1970s, with the first world championship occurring in 1978.

This, allied to the fact that a governing body had been formed in January 1973 and that Bristow had not only supreme talent for one so young but an imposing personality and uncontained belief, enabled him to make a very successful living. Cocky and arrogant, he invariably wound opponents up before and during matches with his gamesmanship. Crowds would boo Bristow when he was on stage, no less so than in Scotland, an atmosphere in which he revelled.

As well as his world championship exploits, Bristow also lifted the prestigious Winmau World Masters crown no fewer than five times (1977, 1979, 1981, 1983 and 1984). He was a winner of the World Cup Singles on four occasions (1983, 1985, 1987, 1989) and won the News of the World tournament in 1983 and 1984 together with countless other major tournaments including the British Open and Swedish Open three times each and the North American Open on four occasions.

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**Bristow's constant showboating could never disguise his true, natural talent for darts.**

During the Swedish Open in the summer of 1987, he found himself unable to let go of his darts properly - a psychological condition known as dartitis, a bit like the yips in golf. He was never the same player again but did, incredibly, regain the number one ranking briefly in 1990.

Bristow had come across a raw darts talent in Stoke-on-Trent in the late 1980s and offered him 10,000 pounds to fund his development in the game, on the understanding that the cash would be repaid. The player was Phil Taylor who would go on to usurp his mentor as the greatest darts player ever, with Bristow often on the receiving end of his brilliance.

Bristow's form deteriorated alarmingly in the early 1990s and he was dropped from the Merseyside team (his third county) and the national side. The split within darts (another governing body was formed) coincided with, effectively, the end of his career.

In the late 1990s, he ceased playing the sport professionally - his swansong being a classic semi-final in the 1997 PDC World Championships which he lost, ironically, to his protégée Phil Taylor - and now works mainly as a darts commentator and pundit for Sky Sports during PDC tournaments, whilst continuing to travel and play on the "exhibitions" circuit.

Bristow was awarded the MBE for his services to darts.

Also Bristow has six toes on his right foot , which some say gave him an advantage in balance over other players .

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### Scott Burton's Final Thought

Eric Bristow was the true face of world darts during the 1980s. To dominate the era like he did was an incredible achievement, and for those who were lucky enough to watch him play, he provided great entertainment value.

Aside from all the World Championship titles and World Matchplay victories, his personality helped to transform a pub-based sport into an international commodity.

I remember watching the 1983 World Championship Final, where Bristow was defeated by a then relatively-unknown Keith Deller. It was a GREAT match, and for all of Bristow's swaggering, he took the defeat with grace and integrity. He had scored the greater average score throughout the final, whereas Deller had been more clinical with his finishing on the doubles.

Bristow should also be remembered for discovering the emerging talent of Phil Taylor, the player he would groom to become the greatest darts player of all-time.



The Crafty Cockney – focusing on yet another dynamite checkout!